

Approved For Release 2005/12/23 : CIA-RDP81B00401R000400130004-3

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12 February 1980

## MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Islam and Shiism in Iran and Central Asia, Comments of Academic Specialists in a Conference sponsored by the Congressional Research Service, 8 February 1980

## The Islamic Revolution in Iran

Dr. Hamid Algar of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, addressed himself to the background of the Islamic revolution in Iran. In a sharply polemical talk, Algar traced the history of clerical opposition to "internal tyranny and foreign domination" in Iran. Algar frankly admitted that he was communicating the views held by the revolutionaries of Khomeini's Islamic Movement, and thus the value of his comments is primarily that of reflecting these views rather than of providing an objective assessment. Algar, of British origins but who has apparently converted to Islam, visited Iran most recently in December 1979 and interviewed Khomeini during his stay. [ ]

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Algar's remarks betrayed an apparently virulent hatred of the Shah combined with a naive view of the "abominable" policy of the US in having supported him. Asked what policy he would recommend the US adopt toward Iran now, for example, Algar said that "the US should get the hell out of the Islamic world before they are kicked out." He said that it was extreme self-deception to believe that Iran might enter into an alliance with the US against the USSR since the revolution was anti-imperialistic and Moslems regard imperialism as a "single entity." Algar repeatedly stressed US "complicity in the Shah's crimes" -- reflecting what he claimed was the Iranian view that in supporting the Shah's military and security forces the US was responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iranians. Asked by a professor from Columbia University, for example, if the Iranians themselves were responsible for anything that had happened in Iran since 1953, Algar responded that he regarded the question as deeply insulting to the Iranian people, since with US assistance the Shah had been "slaughtering thousands of Iran's best young people" who took the responsibility for opposing him. To the extent that Algar's views do represent a significant element of Iranian public opinion, then, the difficulties for any Iranian political leader advocating a moderate policy toward the US are apparent. [ ]

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 This memorandum was prepared by [ ] of the Iran Task Force. Comments and queries may be addressed to Chief, Iran Task Force on [ ]

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Parenthetically, it is worth noting that Dr. Thomas Ricks of Georgetown University, when asked to comment on US policy toward Iran, took an equally hostile view of past US policy toward Iran, but was somewhat more moderate on what steps might be taken in the future. Ricks commented that the US must above all be cautious in its approach to Iran and be mindful of the narrow line between assistance and interference. The US, in Ricks' view, must give a clear signal of acceptance of the Iranian revolution, by appointing a new Ambassador acceptable to the Iranians, by initiating in Congress and investigation of past US policy, and actively participating in any UN-sponsored investigation of the Shah's rule. [ ]

Algar views the historical background of the Iranian Islamic revolution as dating to the establishment of Shiism as the state religion of Iran under the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century. This event he compares to the great transformation of Iran in the mid-seventh century when Islam was brought to Iran. Under the Safavids, the then marginally represented Shiites became established, and by the middle of the 17th century they had gone a step further by breaking with the monarch, criticising him and ultimately denying his legitimacy. By the beginning of the 18th century and the collapse of the Safavid dynasty there was a near total break between the monarchy and the Shiite clergy. During the political chaos of the century which followed, with various independent rulers in various parts of Iran, the independence of the Shiite clergy from secular authority was all but total. [ ] 25X1

The Qajar dynasty, founded at the end of the 18th century, attempted to base its legitimacy upon the claim that the monarch was the "Shadow of God on Earth." This claim, which had been made by the Safavids and questioned by the clerics, was simply rejected by the clerics under the Qajars. The intensification of the split between the monarchy and the clerical establishment was brought about by the "corruption and tyranny" of the monarchs and the perception that the monarch was the agent of foreign intervention in Iran. In fact, Algar said, the community of interest between the Iranian ruler and foreign powers, notably the British and the Russians, was clear. In 1872, monopolies on the establishment of a banking system, the building of a railroad, and the exploitation of all mineral resources was granted by the monarch to Baron Reuter, representing the British. Under pressure from the leading Islamic cleric of Tehran, the then Shah revoked the monopolies. Similarly, in 1892, Nasir el-Din Shah granted a concession to the British for the cultivation and marketing of tobacco. This move, involving a product in wide use and perceived as only further evidence of the corruption of the monarchy, sparked even wider dissent than the earlier concessions to the British. Mirza Shirazi, then the leading Iranian cleric, issued a religious pronouncement declaring that the use of tobacco would thereafter be considered "making war on the Imam", effectively declaring it heresy, and the concession was withdrawn. [ ]

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During the first two decades of this century, Iranian Shiite

clerics moved beyond a broad and diffuse opposition to the monarchy by seeking a governmental device to limit its authority. This was the constitutionalist movement which, Algar claims, having been led by the clergy, clearly demonstrates that the movement against the Shah was never meant to lead to the establishment of a religious dictatorship. The clerics, he said, were the first to seek a constitution to ensure the prevention of tyranny. Although a constitution was written, however, with the rise to power of Reza Shah the absolute monarchy continued. [ ] 25X1

During the 1920s and 1930s under the rule of Reza Shah, a period of what Algar claims was severe repression by the standards of the time but which "pales by comparison with the rule of the next Shah," the Shiite clergy turned its attention away from political concerns. The development of the educational system in Qom was one notable accomplishment of the time. Among the leaders of the religious education reforms was Abdul Karim Haeri. Khomeini was one of Haeri's students. [ ] 25X1

In 1941, Reza Shah was deposed by the British, the Soviets and the US, and his son Mohammad Reza brought to power. Between 1941 and 1953, with a certain degree of freedom of expression allowed, the Shiite clergy became more politically active. Among the leaders of this time was Ayatollah Kashani, though the dominant position in anti-monarchical politics was clearly Mossadeq. One of the factors contributing to the relatively secondary role played by the clergy was that the leading religious scholar of the time -- Ayatollah Boroujerdi -- was a quietistic figure who failed to speak out on the major political issues. [ ] 25X1

In 1953, with the Shah having been compelled by the Iranian people to leave the country, the US persuaded him to return, in Algar's words, "to serve the cause of humanity by renewing the repression and oppression of his people." The Shah carried out a purge of public life and no political figure emerged to take Mossadeq's place. Between this time and Khomeini's emergence as a leader in June 1963, Algar claims that 15,000 Iranians were killed by the Shah. In 1963, the Shiite clergy emerged again in a leading political role behind Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini's role was as the leading critic of the Shah's violation of the constitution and of his "unbounded subordination to the US, and as a corollary, his assistance to Israel." [ ] 25X1

Khomeini's exile in Iraq between 1964 and 1978 hardly reduced his appeal among Iranians, whose Shiite faith contains the notion of a "hidden Imam" who is to return to establish a just rule. Algar claims that Khomeini's analysis of the state of Iranian society was persuasive to Iranians, and that therefore clergy-inspired or led dissidence continued. In 1970, again in Algar's words, a meeting of US investors took place designed to further foreign domination of the Iranian economy. A clerical leader protested, but was arrested and tortured to death by SAVAK. Algar then cited a number of other stories of SAVAK brutality and concluded that during this period Iranians were active in opposing a "butchering and abominable dictatorship imposed on

25X1 them from outside." [ ]

25X1 Algar concluded that with the revolution which commenced in January 1978, Iran carved out a unique place in the politics of the Middle East. Whereas elsewhere in the region there have been coups, in Iran a genuine social revolution has taken place. Khomeini's movement has been a revolution without a political party, moreover, a movement relying on tradition brought about by the willingness of members of the mass to be martyred for their cause. [ ]

Algar believes that the future of the revolution in Iran is guaranteed by what he characterizes as an "intellectual depth" based on a reconsideration of Islam. One of the pillars of the revolution, in other words, is Islamic modernism, the expression of religious concerns outside of the traditional idiom and traditional preoccupations. [ ]

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25X1 In Algar's view, Islamic modernism in Iran can be traced back to the period of the Second World War when at Tehran University Mehdi Bazargan and some of his associates founded the Islamic Students Association. This movement soon expanded to include faculty, students, and other outside Tehran University. Bazargan was the key organizer behind the movement and also began to write prolifically on the application of Islam to modern social problems. [ ]

25X1 The gap which then grew between the Islamic modernists was spanned by others, notably Ayatollah Mahmoud Talaqani. Speaking at Tehran's Hedayat mosque, Talaqani complemented the work of Bazargan at the universities and so brought mosque and university together as centers of opposition to the Shah. These efforts paralleled the efforts of the more traditional clergy led by Ayatollah Khomeini. [ ]

25X1 In addition to Bazargan and Talaqani, another major figure of the modernist movement was Ali Shariati. Born in Mashhad, Shariati returned from education in France in 1964. The period of his greatest work was between 1964 and 1977, during which time he was frequently imprisoned by the Shah. Shariati was exiled from Iran in 1977 and died in London in July of that year, apparently under mysterious circumstances -- Algar claims he was "martyred by SAVAK." Shariati, in Algar's view, presented Iranian youth with a fresh and convincing vision of Islam and its applicability to modern problems. Shariati criticized traditionalist Islam which was quietistic and preoccupied with questions of ritual. [ ]

25X1 As a final element among the factors contributing to the strength of the Islamic opposition to secular monarchy since World War II, Algar mentioned Islamic groups which have had recourse to "armed struggle." The first of these was the Fedayan-eh-Islam, established by Navab Safavi in the early 1940s. The Fedayan initially supported Mossadeq and organized support for him. Later, however, they broke with him and Safavi

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was arrested. Among the targets of assassination by the Fedayan was a Prime Minister, Razmara, and a secular nationalist leader, Ahmad Kosravi. There are in Iran today several different organizations which claim descent from the Fedayan. A second militant Islamic group was the Hezb-eh-Melat-eh-Islami, the Islamic People's Party, which assassinated Prime Minister Mansour in the early 1960s. Thirdly, there is the Mujahedin-eh-Khalq, the People's Strugglers, founded in the mid-1960s after the failure of the 1963 Khomeini-led movement had demonstrated the necessity of resorting to armed force. Algar probably accurately reflected the view of leaders in Khomeini's Islamic movement when he characterized the Mujahedin as a basically Islamic movement, yet one which advanced "ideological ambiguities", an apparent reference to the leftist leanings of the present Mujahedin. [ ]

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Commenting on Algar's remarks, Dr. Mehdi Haeri, a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University, appeared to reveal inadvertently some of the rifts in what Algar was advancing as a monolithic Islamic movement against "internal tyranny and foreign domination." That is, the Islamic modernism described by Algar is apparently still somewhat suspect among traditionalist members of the Shiite clergy. Haeri noted that Islamic modernism was not founded by Mehdi Bazargan after World War II, but certainly dates to the constitutional movement at the turn of this century. Moreover, Haeri said, in any case the notion of modernism, of developing religious thought in response to change is a basic element even in "traditionalist" Islam. Haeri claimed that it was less a matter of a gap between traditional Islam and modernist Islam spanned by leaders like Ayatollah Talaqani, and more a difficult question of determining genuine modernization from spurious modernization, or that which infringed on the dignity of humanity. [ ]

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In his comments on Algar's remarks, Dr. Ricks provided his views on the character of the Iranian revolution and some comments on the issues currently being debated by the Islamic revolutionaries. Ricks noted that the revolution was not anti-US or anti-West, claiming that popular feeling was not hostile to the US. However, the revolution was certainly anti-imperialist and anti-interventionist. Secondly, the revolution has not been pan-Islamic, but rather pro-Islamic, emphasizing the theme of self-reliance. Ricks commented that the revolution involved a diverse movement and was far from monolithic, gathering together more than 3000 political and vocational organizations propounding their views in 120-130 newspapers. Finally, Ricks claimed that the revolution did not produce a new form of elitism. The revolution, he said, is popularly and broadly based, directed toward communalism or the equal distribution of wealth. In his remarks on current issues, Ricks noted several points of debate. These include the extent to which the Shiite clergy should be actively involved in the formal structures of government; the extent of centralization of political and economic decision-making; the merits of traditional as against modernist Islam; and the extent to which democratic processes are being created in Iran. Ricks did not expand on this latter point, noting only

that though the voting in two national referenda and the voting for a new president had generally been conceded to have been free, there have been critics. [ ]

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#### Elements of Shiite Islam

Dr. Charles Adams of McGill University, Zuhair Jwaideh of the Library of Congress, and Dr. George Makdisi of the University of Pennsylvania discussed some of the major elements of Shiite Islam. [ ]

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Adams remarked that Shiite Islam is chiefly characterized by the doctrine of the Imamate, historically the legitimate successors to the prophet of whom the twelfth went into "occultation" and will return to establish justice. The concept of the Imam is more complex, however, creating the notion of one who is to guide, to interpret, and to channel divine power, order, and information into the world. The Imam may even be said to serve a cosmological purpose. It is the existence of the Imam which provides the very structure of existence. [ ]

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The basic elements of worship in Ithna'ashari Shiite Islam ("twelver" Shiism, or that branch which accepts the legitimacy of twelve Imams, which is predominant in Iran) are closely tied to the concept of the Imamate. The third Imam, Hossein, was martyred and it is his death at the hands of an oppressive government which forms the center of Shiite worship. The ceremonies on the tenth day of the month of Moharram, the anniversary of the martyrdom, are the high point of this worship. However, there are continuous staged performances of the event, readings of the story, and professional "entertainers" who travel the country relating the story. The themes of this worship include the oppressiveness and injustice of established authority; the good man wrongly done by, a man whose true value was not recognized and therefore suffered a great wrong; and a theme of suffering and martyrdom in which Hossein's death may become a kind of expiation for man's sins in which the worshipper may participate. The emotional content of this worship includes guilt, grief, sorrow, a sense of loss, and purgation. The sense of participation in the suffering of the Imam creates an intensity of emotion which distinguishes Shiite Islam from other branches of the religion. Finally, there is an eschatological element in the worship, a sense that the Imam is to return and that by taking part in the worship and being ready to be martyred one can anticipate his coming and even bring that time closer. [ ]

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The Iranian constitution establishes the concept of the "Velayat-eh-Faqih", or the rule of the theologian. Jwaideh noted as background that the word "faqih" is of the same root as "fiq", which means a knowledge of the practical rules of religion which regulate the activities of persons according to the Quran and the traditions. Islamic law developed through four periods: 622-632, or the period from Mohammad's flight to Medina until his death which is considered the legislative period when the rules were given by God; 632 until the second century after the flight

("hegira") formed the period of the extension of these laws by the Moslem community; between the second century after the hegira and the middle of the fourth the four great schools of Islamic law were established since which time there has been no basic development of the law; and finally the period from the middle of the fourth century after the hegira until the present. The four great schools of Islamic jurisprudence -- the Hanifa, the Maleki, the Hanbali, and the Shafeqi -- all rely on the same basic principles but differ in their application. Among the sources of these basic principles are the Quran itself; the Sunna, or the deeds and utterances of the Prophet together with judgements to which he gave tacit approval; Ijma, or the consensus of the religious jurists, the need for which developed out of ruling on questions on which the other sources remain silent; and Ijtehad, or independent interpretation consisting in the extension by a jurist from the known to an analogical deduction.

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In his comments on these remarks, Makdisi noted that in a sense the distinction between Shiite and Sunni Islam is that where Sunnism is a religion of consensus, Shiism is a religion of authority, emphasizing the concept of the Imam. Makdisi noted, however, that since the Prophet and the first four Imams, "political" and "religious" had been split somewhat, with the Caliph provided executive authority and the ulema, the clergy, providing a kind of legislative and juridical authority. Strains were produced by the increasing secularization of political power. Three categories of ulema could eventually be distinguished: those who were intransigent and free to speak out against the government; those who were in the pay of the government; and those who were both acceptable to the people and yet could work with the government. These categories could be applied to the Iranian clergy at the time of the revolution, but apply equally to the ulema of the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries.

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#### Islam in Central Asia

Dr. Edward Allworth of Columbia University addressed his remarks to status of Islam in Central Asia, or more precisely, those parts of the Soviet Union bordering on Iran and Afghanistan.

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Allworth noted that in the Soviet Union, Islam is under "foreign domination," and in an apparent effort to provide a comparative basis against which to consider Dr. Algar's rather strident remarks about the "tyranny" of the Shah in Iran, noted that in the Soviet Union there is a clear attempt to eradicate the Islamic notion of community ("umma") and replace it with a sense of a proletarian class. Moreover, it is Soviet policy to accentuate ethnic difference among the Islamic groups, so as to foster divisions in what might otherwise be the emergence of a supranational Islamic community.

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Elements of Soviet policy include the establishment of "atheism houses" in the Muslim communities. One such house in Bukhara

provides lectures, films and classes in an effort to instruct students in the negative side of their religion. Secondly, the Soviet constitution provides that religion is separate from that state, but that religion is also separate from education and therefore it is a criminal offense to instruct a pupil in Islam. No religious schooling for children is permitted. In 1968, in a slightly different kind of case, a group performing the Islamic "passion play" was imprisoned and some of those in the audiences were removed from their jobs. [ ]

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Among the rapidly growing Central Asian population there is a strong sense of a Central Asian identity, but only a latent sense of membership in the Muslim community. Most do not profess Islam, at least not publically. Allworth estimates the Central Asian, latently Islamic, community as numbering 26-27 million, with another 4 million in Azarbaijan. For all of these people, there are but two madrasehs, or religious schools, producing perhaps 50 graduates a year. The students are coopted men, not of high intellectual standing, and the existence of the schools at all is probably only to serve the purpose of staving off criticism of Muslim countries, particularly those Muslim countries who need something to stave off popular criticism of their own ties to the Soviets. In Central Asia there are but 150 mosques, where before 1917 there were at least 25,000. Holy days are observed, but only in the sense that the regime is attempting to convert them into secular events. The absence of Muslim leadership in the community is most keenly felt at times of family crisis such as funerrals, but in a larger sense the tragedy is that a great mass of people have been deprived of knowledge of their own history and religious heritage. [ ]

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